

BUTCHER

and

‘THE DUCHESS, THE QUEEN, THE WHORE
AND THE HOUSEWIFE: REVENGE TRAGEDY
AND ITS PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY
THEATRE’

by

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to create a new piece of theatre taking elements from the revenge tragedy genre then subsequently use that piece as a primary text to analyze how and if the genre has influenced the creative process of contemporary theatre, either in the sense of entire generic conventions or stereotypical elements (however minor).

The first part of the thesis tells a story of the downfall of a woman with a troubled past; a series of events similar to the earliest revenge tragedies but transposed into a contemporary setting. The story elements and character archetypes are disguised within the façade of a modern thriller, but the old techniques are the core of creating this engaging piece of theatre.

In the essay, these techniques are deconstructed. At first beginning with references to the wider framework of the oldest models of revenge tragedy (Senecan and Kydian), but then focusing in on specific elements with comparison to a varied array of contemporary writing to prove that the models are still in use to this day.

In conclusion, the thesis argues that while the revenge tragedy formula is considered archaic, its use in writing is still utilized.

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BUTCHER

Synopsis

Karen Jones is living life in a standstill. She never talks about her past and she isolates herself from all of her neighbours. Her only source of contact is Martha, who is constantly barging in, and Bill, the only person she seems to have an amicable relationship with. As their interactions grow more affectionate, she begins to come out of her shell, and develop hope that she could build something better out of her life (a life haunted by mysterious harassment, noises, and trauma). The hope is dashed when a reporter lies her way into the flat. Karen was branded a child killer by the press, pilloried by her community, and rejected by society. When old troubles begin to flare up again, Karen's fragile mind cannot take it. She breaks and becomes the 'Baby Butcher' that everyone thought she was, with disastrous consequences for herself and the people around her.

Characters

Karen Jones/Kutcher

Bill

Martha Argyle

Linda Cosford

Location: The top floor of a block of council flats. An apartment isolated at the end of the corridor, up a set of stairs.

Time: The present

Notes: a “-“ the end of one sentence at the beginning of another indicated an interruption. Two “-“ separating a section of a line indicate a sudden change of thought.

Prologue

Sunday evening. A small flat. Old, but cared for. Kitchen and living room area are combined, with the kitchen at the back. At the back is a large black door (the front door). Either side at the front are two doorways. One leads to the bedroom, the other to the bathroom. It is daytime, but little light gets into the flat. Keys are heard in the door.

Very slowly, the door is pushed open, revealing KAREN, 50, holding four shopping bags. As she comes into the flat the heavy door swings to a sudden slamming shut, which she barely acknowledges. She rests her bags on the kitchen counter and begins to unpack them, putting each item in a specific cupboard. It appears the food is organized to an extremely high level. In the final bag is a large amount of alcohol, which she leaves on the counter.

When she is finished, she fills the kettle with water and turns it on, before crossing downstage into the living room area. She sits on a sofa and turns on a radio nearby. Music (with just a hint of static, as if not tuned properly) drifts through the flat. Karen sits silently listening. Her eyes begin to close and the hint of a smile can be seen.

*Violent and loud barking from a dog outside jolts her awake. She sits. She stares.
Very faintly, the sound of something coming up the stairs. The quickest of knocks.
Karen wheels round.*

KAREN: *(approaching the door)* Hello?

Silence. Karen is at the door.

KAREN: Bill?

Her hand is on the knob

KAREN: Hello?

*She opens the door. No-one. There is a small basket on the floor. Karen quickly looks
down the stairwell, then hurriedly takes the basket and shuts the door. She moves
back to the sofa. The kettle is near boiling.*

*There is something in the basket wrapped in a blanket. Worry seems to creep across
Karen's face. She reaches in.*

It's a baby doll with its head pulled off.

Karen stares at it. A silent scream. The kettle has boiled. She hurls the doll to one side and starts frantically walking around the flat, looking around wildly and pulling at her hair.

As the kettle dies down, there is a sound. It sounds like it could be a rusty gate being opened, but it could also be a child's laugh. Karen is still; petrified. She looks around.

She bursts into tears, sinking to the ground.

Blackout.

Act 1

Scene 1

Wednesday evening. Karen is unpacking shopping. Sitting on the sofa, wearing crisp casual attire, and looking around the house is LINDA COSFORD, 32. She appears friendly.

LINDA: Interesting place.

KAREN: It's a bit rough, but it's home now, and it grows on you.

Beat.

KAREN: Sorry. Getting distracted. Thank you for helping me with the bags.

LINDA: Don't worry about it, Ms. Jones. It's the least I could do.

Karen remembers something.

KAREN: Oh, yes! Your car. So sorry.

Karen rustles through some papers by the telephone.

KAREN: I'm sure I've got a number here somewhere. Sorry.

LINDA: You apologize a lot, don't you?

KAREN: Sor... I'm just not used to meeting new people.

LINDA: You've been here a while?

KAREN: About two years.

LINDA: And no visitors?

KAREN: Not regularly. Everyone keeps themselves to themselves here.

LINDA: Everyone?

KAREN: Most people.

LINDA: That's nice, I suppose.

KAREN: It is.

LINDA: For you?

KAREN: For anyone who likes that sort of thing.

LINDA: Sure.

Beat.

KAREN: I did it again! The number is here somewhere, I promise.

LINDA: (*chuckling*) I told you not to worry.

KAREN: Of course, sorry.

LINDA: And not to apologize.

Pause.

LINDA: Do you live with anyone?

KAREN: No, just me.

LINDA: No boyfriend or husband?

Karen freezes for a moment.

LINDA: If that's not too personal a-

KAREN: -No one.

LINDA: I'm sorry, I've overstepped here. That was very rude.

KAREN: It's fine.

LINDA: Still I'm-

KAREN: -Honestly. It's just me here.

LINDA: Who do you talk to?

KAREN: I talk to Bill.

LINDA: Bill?

KAREN: He's from downstairs. He's a nice man. A good man.

LINDA: I thought you didn't have any visitors?

KAREN: I wouldn't consider him a visitor. We live in the same building.

LINDA: Still, he comes over.

KAREN: I guess so.

LINDA: That must be lovely.

KAREN: Well-

LINDA: -I wish I had that. I have a ground floor flat, and there's only two more above me. One is empty most of the year; a foreign businessman, I think, and the other is a man who works nights. I wake up to the sound of snoring. Hardly what you'd call a community atmosphere.

KAREN: You're not missing out on anything. Bill's the only sane one here.

LINDA: You have good chats?

KAREN: *(The hint of a smile)* Yes.

LINDA: That's lovely. *(beat)* Don't your family come to visit?

Karen's smile fades. She appears glazed over.

KAREN: No. No family.

LINDA: At all?

KAREN: No.

LINDA: I'm sorry. I can see I've upset you.

Linda gets up.

LINDA: Are you OK?

KAREN: Fine.

Linda starts leading her to the sofa.

KAREN: I'm fine.

LINDA: Just sit down for a moment.

KAREN: No, I-

LINDA: My car can wait. Can I make you a cup of tea? Juice? It's the least I can do for upsetting you.

KAREN: Tea is fine. You didn't upset me.

Linda is at the kettle.

LINDA: You don't have to put on a brave face, I understand. And I'm sorry. Milk?

KAREN: *(Disorientated)* Yes. No sugar.

LINDA: Sure.

Linda notices the contents of the bags: some basic groceries and a substantial amount of alcohol.

LINDA: Are you having a party?

KAREN: What?

LINDA: There's- Nevermind. Just being silly.

Linda prepares a mug, looks at the kettle and returns to the sofa.

KAREN: Sorry. I was just a bit overwhelmed.

LINDA: I didn't mean to touch a nerve.

KAREN: You couldn't possibly have known.

LINDA: Still, I apologize unreservedly.

KAREN: It's fine.

Pause. Karen is making a difficult decision.

KAREN: Something happened. A long time ago. And I moved here. And I don't normally talk about this, especially not to a stranger but... It's not something I usually... I just want to forget about it. But it's there. In the corner of my eye. *(beat)* I must sound crazy.

LINDA: *(Placing her hand on Karen's)* No. Not at all. It's good to talk, and I want to listen.

Karen takes a deep breath.

KAREN: I had children. Two boys. They're not here anymore. People thought... *horrible* things. I came here to just keep going.

LINDA: More people should know about this.

KAREN: I don't think-

LINDA: -I can see how much pain you're in. If you open up, you'll feel better, Mrs. Kutcher. I promise you that.

Silence. The kettle boils.

KAREN: I said my name was Jones.

Pause. Linda's demeanor changes.

LINDA: You did, didn't you? Fuck.

KAREN: What's going on?

LINDA: Silly mistake.

KAREN: Who are you?!

Scene 2

The previous Monday. Sitting in the kitchen area, sipping a cup of tea is BILL, 48, a rough looking but friendly-faced man. Karen is scraping the remains of her lunch into

the bin. The remnants land on the now broken basket, which has been stuffed in with some force.

BILL: Took me a while to get in. That bloody door you've put at the top of the stairs-

KAREN: Oh yes. That terrible dog keeps running up here and scratching my door. Gives me quite a fright.

BILL: That thing's a bloody menace. Barking all hours of the day.

KAREN: I don't think they feed that thing. All it seems to do is bark.

BILL: I wish that's all it did.

KAREN: What do you mean?

BILL: I've heard it sort of goes for people if it's in a bad mood.

KAREN: Oh my!

BILL: If I didn't know any better, I'd say that bloody hound has a taste for humans.

KAREN: *(slight chuckle)* Don't be silly, Bill.

BILL: I can't help it; it's all I'm good at.

KAREN: I'm sure there are a lot of things you're good at.

BILL: I thought I was good at making tea until I tasted your brew.

KAREN: I'm well practiced.

BILL: No doubt about that.

Karen laughs. Small, but genuine.

KAREN: It appears you're good at flattering me, Bill.

BILL: I'd be a bloody liar if I said these chats weren't a high point in my day.

KAREN: You're always welcome.

Beat.

Bill takes another sip of tea. He lets out a sigh of pleasure.

BILL: You are a bloody marvel, Karen Jones.

KAREN: I try my best.

BILL: If my best were even half of yours, maybe I'd be doing a little better.

KAREN: Always the charmer, Bill.

BILL: I'm glad someone thinks so. Lots of people can't stand it.

KAREN: Like whom?

BILL: This frosty madam who was round the other day.

KAREN: Who, Martha?

BILL: Pfft, Martha? That woman would never let me get a word in! No, it was this smartly dressed bird. Says she was from the paper.

The faint sound of a kettle boiling. Karen is unnerved.

KAREN: The paper?

BILL: Yeah. Some bloody tabloid nonsense. Asking about the tenants.

KAREN: Really?

BILL: Yeah. Weird name. I think it was Kutcher.

Karen inadvertently drops her plate on the floor. It smashes. Bill leaps up to help her.

BILL: Watch yourself!

KAREN: *(on the verge of panic)* Sorry, so clumsy! Didn't know what I was thinking.

BILL: No worries, it happens all the time. I've lost three mugs that way. Dustpan and brush?

KAREN: *(pointing to cupboard)* In there.

Bill retrieves the dustpan and brush and Karen controls herself.

KAREN: What did you tell this woman from the paper?

BILL: I said I've lived here for bloody years and I've never met a Kutcher. I would've noticed that smarmy film star walking around.

Bill picks up the full dustpan.

BILL: Don't worry about this, I'll run it down to the bins. No point cutting up your bin bag.

KAREN: Thank you, Bill. You're so thoughtful.

BILL: Oh no, not thought. I don't know what I'd do with that.

He smiles.

BILL: Shall I check in later on?

KAREN: *(a little too quickly)* Yes! That would... that would be lovely.

BILL: No problem. I'll let myself out.

He moves to the door and opens it.

BILL: Take care of yourself, Karen.

KAREN: Thank you. See you soon!

BILL: But not too soon.

He leaves chuckling but gets stuck on the child-proof door at the top of the stairs.

BILL: Bloody door! Where did you get this thing anyway?

He manages to unlock it and go downstairs. The door swings shut. Karen's smile fades. She grabs a glass and fills it with the alcohol on the counter and drinks almost the entire glass in one gulp.

She runs and looks out the window, scanning for any unusual signs. She rapidly draws the curtains shut, refills the glass and sits on the sofa. She looks at the glass and slams it down on the table before hugging her knees.

KAREN: *(quietly, to herself)* No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...

Blackout. A dog barking outside.

Scene 3

Tuesday afternoon. The bottles on the counter are almost depleted. Karen is propping herself up on the kitchen counter. There's a knock at the door. She looks up, and staggers over to the door. She opens it, and MARTHA ARGYLE, 43, dressed in ill-fitting jeans, comfortable shows. She immediately enters the room, almost whacking KAREN with a large handbag.

MARTHA: Karen, so glad you're in! You won't believe the day I've had! I was walking up the stairs just now, and I nearly slipped foot over arse in a puddle of - well I don't know what it was and I certainly wasn't going to check – anyway, as I was finding my feet, I heard the most unbelievable racket coming from the Swarfields! As you know, he's been in a bad way since he lost his job at the post office, and she's never really forgiven her for kissing her sister on Boxing Day that one time. Now it sounded like they were having a bit of a lovers tiff – well not tiff, more like bloody Waterloo! There was F's and C's flying everywhere, and I thought to myself Karen,

‘there are children in this building! Just because your marriage is going down the shitter doesn’t mean my kids have to hear that filth!’ Sometimes it’s a nightmare living in this place!

Beat.

MARTHA: My throat has gone really dry all of a sudden; can I have a cup of tea, love?

KAREN: Yes, it’s just boiled.

MARTHA: Thank you so much, love. It’s been such a stressful day. I’ve been swept off my feet. Mind if I sit down?

She moves to the sofa.

MARTHA: I’m sitting down.

She sits down.

MARTHA: I’ve sat down.

Beat.

MARTHA: Those bloody youths were back again last night, yelling and screaming. They kicked over Mr Cooper's bins. Mind you, as you know, I've told Mr Cooper not to put his bins out that early as it attracts those cats, dozens of them – well, not dozens. Maybe three. I know exactly who those kids are and I will speak to their parents, but shouldn't it be their responsibility?

Karen comes over with a cup of tea

KAREN: There you are.

MARTHA: Thank you love. You're one of the good ones.

KAREN: So *I* haven't done anything wrong?

MARTHA: Of course not! Why would do something wrong? I'm here to ask for some help.

KAREN: How could I help?

MARTHA: The council clearly isn't going to do anything about these jobs without a little bit of prodding. I've been going around all the flats with this.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a large clipboard with a pen attached to the top.

MARTHA: I just need you to sign it.

Karen: Sign it with what?

Martha: *(laughing)* ‘Sign it with what?’, she says! Your name! I’ve got nearly 200 signatures here; I just need yours to push it over the mark.

She sips her tea and makes a disgruntled noise

MARTHA: I think your kettles broken dear, that tea is cold as ice.

KAREN: *(surprised)* Oh... sorry...

She takes the cup and returns to the sink

KAREN: I could have sworn –

MARTHA: - Are you all right, love?

KAREN: what?

MARTHA: you seem a bit... you know... *(She waves her hand in front of her eyes)*
Glazed over.

KAREN: Oh it’s nothing, just a long night

Martha's eyes move to the bottles on the counter

MARTHA: Right. So can I get your signature?

KAREN: I'm not sure Martha. You don't know what places like that can do with personal information.

MARTHA: Now don't be like that, Karen. It's for the good of the community. We need to protect ourselves from these villains. You're in the same position as me; we're losing sleep, afraid to go out at night, both enjoy a tippie in the afternoon-

KAREN: - I'm sorry?

MARTHA: Don't worry about it, love. As you know, I understand more than most that sometimes you need an injection of excitement to get you through the day. You just have to be careful that the wrong people don't catch you doing it. Some people like to talk.

Pause. Karen slowly bends over and signs the petition.

MARTHA: Splendid! I'm glad to see you showing support for the respectable members of the community.

KAREN: I don't think I'd like being on your bad side.

Martha laughs. There is a noise of something heavy running up the stairs. Outside the door; barking jumping, scratching. Karen is unnerved.

MARTHA: Don't tell me it's that dog again.

KAREN: Did you close the gate on your way in?

MARTHA: I don't remember. *(To the door)* Piss off! *(to Karen)* I'm going out there.

KAREN: Don't, it's huge, it might hurt you.

MARTHA: I'm not scared of it.

As Martha heads to the door, we can hear shouting. The scratching stops. Martha opens the door. It's Bill.

BILL: Pest control, at your service.

MARTHA: And what are you doing up here making a nuisance of yourself?

BILL: You're bloody welcome.

KAREN: Thank you, Bill. I'm not quite sure what we'd have done if you hadn't come up.

MARTHA: I know what I would've done; punched the fucker in the nose.

BILL: Is that how you get men now, Martha?

MARTHA: Watch it.

BILL: Only messing.

KAREN: All the same, thank you.

BILL: Anytime. Why was your gate open?

KAREN: Martha forgot to close it.

MARTHA: I was pre-occupied! Where did you get that thing anyway?

KAREN: That? I found it.

MARTHA: Well, I hope you had it sterilized first.

BILL: Said the actress to the bishop.

MARTHA: Still here, Bill?

BILL: I thought since I'm in the neighbourhood, I'd have a world-famous Karen Jones cup of tea.

MARTHA: I wouldn't risk it with the quality of her kettle.

BILL: I'll take my chances.

MARTHA: And what makes you think you can barge in here?

BILL: I thought fending off the Hound of the bloody Baskervilles might count for something.

KAREN: It does. Come in, Bill. I'll put the kettle on. You deserve it for being so brave.

MARTHA: Brave now, is he?

Bill enters, looking at Karen. They smile at each other.

Beat.

MARTHA: I think I should leave. Got to get this petition filled up before the end of the week, and I'm sure you'd appreciate some private time.

She begins to leave.

MARTHA: See you soon, you two, and play nice!

She heads down the stairs. She can be seen closing the gate behind her before the door swings shut.

Karen begins to fill the kettle up.

BILL: I'll take tangling with a dog over that bitch any day.

Karen laughs.

BILL: Sorry.

KAREN: No need to apologise.

BILL: Bit rude.

KAREN: I've heard worse.

BILL: Shouldn't swear in front of a lady.

KAREN: Well as soon as a lady's here, I'll let you know.

BILL: Karen Jones! Was that a joke?

KAREN: Maybe.

Karen clunks the kettle down on the base.

BILL: You seem a bit wibbly-wobbly.

KAREN: I'm ok.

BILL: Are you sure?

KAREN: Definitely.

BILL: That's a relief. I was getting worried about you. What with you getting all worked up and doing your Greek wedding routine.

KAREN: Honestly, Bill. I'm doing fine. It's just... I'm fine.

BILL: You don't have to put on a brave face with me. I want to know what's going on.

KAREN: Why?

BILL: Because I care.

KAREN: About what's going on?

BILL: Yes. And about... yes.

KAREN: I haven't had much sleep is all. Too much noise. Makes it difficult to nod off.

BILL: (*gesturing to bottles*) Is that why you need all this then?

KAREN: That's not-

BILL: -I'm not judging. That would be a fine day when I can tell someone they're having too much sauce.

KAREN: I'm sorry I'm like this.

BILL: Don't you go saying sorry.

KAREN: It's been so hard lately.

BILL: Nothing to be ashamed off.

KAREN: I've been scared, Bill.

BILL: Scared of what?

KAREN: Scared of myself.

BILL: What?

KAREN: Of how I appear to others.

BILL: Well, I think you're just fine, thank you very much.

KAREN: You don't understand.

BILL: Explain it to me. If you hadn't noticed, I'm a bit of an idiot

A tiny snort from Karen. The kettle has boiled.

BILL: Come on.

Pause.

KAREN: Something happened. Years ago, now. It was in the papers. *I* was in the papers.

BILL: And?

KAREN: Something I'd rather forget. People thought terrible things of me. I hadn't done anything wrong.

BILL: All that tabloid bollocks, eh? No need to worry about that now.

KAREN: You don't know what it's like.

BILL: You're right. I don't. But I do know you. And you're a bloody lovely woman. It doesn't matter to me what happened years ago. You're not some woman from the past. You're Karen Jones, you live here, you make a stellar cup of tea, and you're bloody lovely.

KAREN: Bill...

BILL: I don't read the tabloids for news anyway. Just sports. What could an idiot do with news?

KAREN: Thank you. It's been so long since I've had someone I can trust.

BILL: You can rely on me. Wouldn't want to jeopardise my tea supply, would I? Speaking of which...

Bill begins to head to the kettle.

KAREN: I'll get it.

They almost walk into each other.

BILL: Sorry.

Pause. They are looking at each other. In one fast motion, Karen kisses Bill. Quick, but intense. She withdraws almost as rapidly.

KAREN: Bill... I'm sorry... I didn't... I mean...

BILL: It's alright.

KAREN: No, I'm really, really-

BILL: -Not a problem.

KAREN: Maybe you should-

BILL: -Come back later? Sure.

KAREN: Thanks.

Bill exits, smiling. Karen cradles her head, thinking worriedly. A long, pensive silence. She smiles to herself.

Silence again.

The quiet sound of rattling. Karen looks up and looks towards the door. The noise is coming from the other side, getting louder and louder. The stairwell gate is being shaken violently with greater and greater intensity. Karen looks at the door horrified as the noise continues to build and build from behind it until...

Blackout. A dog barks outside.

END OF ACT

Act 2

Scene 1

Wednesday evening. Karen is staring at Linda. Linda is looking down. Working out her options. Finally, she addresses Karen. She is colder, more business-like.

LINDA: All right then. Karen, my name is Linda Cosford, I'm a reporter with the Daily Direct.

KAREN: If you don't get out of my house now-

LINDA: -The last thing you want is an argument attracting your neighbors. What would Bill think?

KAREN: How-?

LINDA: -The details and morals are unimportant. What matters is your *story*.

KAREN: (*Broken*) You all had your story.

LINDA: Not *this* story.

KAREN: What?

LINDA: Human interest. There are a lot of people who would be interested in this.

KAREN: No.

LINDA: You could get your side of the story out to the masses.

KAREN: The Direct... called me-

LINDA: “Karen Kutcher: Baby Butcher”, I’m aware.

KAREN: So if you think-

LINDA: -Karen, if you cooperate with me, the world will finally hear your side of the story.

KAREN: No.

LINDA: If you don't want to give a proper interview, that's fine.

She reaches into her jacket and removes a Dictaphone and places it on the table.

LINDA: I've got enough to write a decent article. Of course, your perspective won't be well represented, but you don't want to give an interview.

KAREN: Don't...

LINDA: If you're this upset, you won't be interested in seeing what else I have.

KAREN: Please...

LINDA: The article will be released later this week; it might even be online by tomorrow.

She places the Dictaphone back in her jacket and gets up.

LINDA: Thank you for your time, Mrs. Kutcher.

KAREN: No...

Linda moves to the door.

KAREN: *(Weakly)* I'll talk.

Linda turns around.

KAREN: I'll talk.

Linda returns to the sofa and places the Dictaphone back on the table.

LINDA: Wonderful. Let's begin. You murdered your sons five years ago, correct?

KAREN: I-

LINDA: I apologize. You *allegedly* murdered your sons five years ago?

KAREN: It was an accident. Cot death.

LINDA: Sudden Infant Death Syndrome?

KAREN: Yes.

LINDA: Both children within the space of two weeks?

KAREN: That's what happened.

LINDA: What does your husband think about all of this?

KAREN: James Kutcher is no longer my husband.

LINDA: I did not. How insensitive of me. Mrs. Kutcher, do you know the statistical odds of losing two children to SIDS are?

KAREN: No.

LINDA: Over seventy million to one. Why do you expect us to believe that's what happened?

KAREN: That *is* what happened.

LINDA: And you did nothing to save your children?

KAREN: I didn't know. Don't you think I would've saved them? What do you want?

LINDA: I want the truth of what happened, Mrs. Kutcher. The full story. Take a look at this.

Linda reaches into her bag and pulls out an old baby monitor. She places it on the table. Karen is staring at it.

Pause.

LINDA: This is from your house. But you know that already, don't you, Mrs. Kutcher? If your son's death was due to this syndrome, why didn't you help him when you must have heard him?

Silence.

Karen looks down.

KAREN: Michael slept in our room. He was younger, so we needed to keep a closer eye on him. We put William's crib in the spare room across the hall. Thought he'd sleep better that way. When I woke up, Michael was crying. No idea why he did. Must have sensed it. I put my ear to the monitor to hear if the cries had woken up William. It was quiet. I must have complained to James endless times about the noise. It wasn't that I was annoyed; just scared. Scared of hearing my children in pain. I learned how terrifying silence could be. I thought he might have gotten out of the cot, so I was relieved when I saw him. He hadn't been stolen away in the night like all those terrible stories James and me had read about. But then... I couldn't see his toes. He had the most perfect little toes. I got closer to the cot, and I couldn't see his face; it was in the pillow. He was so still; like a doll had replaced him. And it was so quiet. No noise. No wind. No sound of my Will breathing. I turned him over. I knew he was gone, but I didn't want to believe it.

LINDA: Mrs. Kutcher, your son had broken ribs. His death was not immaculate.

KAREN: I tried to get him to breathe. I was begging him, willing him to open his eyes and smile, but he was still. I put my hands on his chest; so small my fingers were touching the blanket. I pushed. And again. And again. I just wanted him to do something. When I finally heard a sound I thought it was a branch snapping off a tree outside. A tiny crack. When I looked down, my hands were inside his chest. Like I was ripping out his heart. I didn't scream. The quiet had gotten inside me. Freezing cold and boiling hot at the same time. Michael was still crying. I don't know how long I was there looking at Will. He didn't look at peace. He looked lost. He just wanted his mummy. I was still looking at him when I heard James' screaming from behind me. Dogs starting barking all down the street, people running out of their houses. I can't recall the next few days, except the stares of strangers. Even the police had disgust in their eyes.

LINDA: They suspected you.

KAREN: I could see the way they looked at me as they turned over the room. Always resting their hands on James' shoulder; reassuring him, and treating me like I was diseased. It got to him. *They* got to him. He wouldn't let me hold Michael or put him to bed. He said he knew it was a cruel freak event, but he never looked at me when he said it.

LINDA: What about a week later?

KAREN: Michael...

LINDA: Yes.

KAREN: James woke up first. He didn't make a sound. The air was sucked out of him just like me. That quiet had come into our bedroom and taken the breath from my husband and my son. Michael had been crying a lot. He hadn't seen his brother and he didn't know why, so I gave him one of his brother's toys. A little crocodile. It still smelt like William. I suppose that's why Michael wanted to be so close to it. Once James pulled his head away, I could see he had a little smile. He was with his brother again...

She trails off.

LINDA: What then?

Pause.

KAREN: The police came back to the house. Their looks were just as hard, but this time with a fire I had never seen before. They said I had murdered my boys. They took me away. I begged James to help me, but he stood there, looking at me like I was a stranger, not saying anything. That quiet had stuck to him. The days in the cell seemed endless. I didn't speak; I had no one to speak to, especially not the man who told me he was going to defend me in court. I saw the look in his eyes.

LINDA: What about the trial?

KAREN: Everyone thought I was a monster. That I had killed my children. That I had lied to everyone.

LINDA: It was reported you cried when presented with some of the evidence. Many people said that was guilt.

KAREN: They shoved the crocodile in my face and told me how I had used it to suffocate my son.

LINDA: Regardless, many people thought - think – you're guilty.

KAREN: I was found innocent.

LINDA: The DNA evidence was contaminated and the judge declared that 'media bias' should not influence the jury.

KAREN: You had decided who I was before you knew anything about me.

LINDA: We knew the facts, and we drew a conclusion. Much like a jury, actually.

KAREN: I'm innocent.

LINDA: Your husband didn't believe that.

KAREN: That's not true.

LINDA: Did he, or did he not file for divorce during your initial time in prison?

Pause.

LINDA: Well?

KAREN: Yes.

LINDA: I see.

KAREN: He couldn't go back. It hurt him too much. I never heard a word from him after the night Michael died.

LINDA: Or maybe he wanted to rebuild his life without the cause of all his pain.

KAREN: I thought I'd be able to bury my children. James had them cremated. He has the urn. I can never see it. I couldn't say goodbye to my boys.

LINDA: Mrs. Kutcher-

KAREN: -Michael hadn't even said his first word.

LINDA: We're getting off topic.

KAREN: I thought you wanted the real story.

LINDA: The real story is the *now*, not the *then*.

KAREN: This is with me everyday.

LINDA: I understand, but the important aspect is your life now.

KAREN: I don't have a life. Michael and William, they were my life.

LINDA: But you moved on, you continued living.

KAREN: "Keeping going" and "moving on" are not the same thing.

LINDA: Now, we're just debating semantics, Mrs. Kutcher.

KAREN: I don't like being called that.

LINDA: Why not? It's who you are.

KAREN: It's who I was. You people just think that's all I am.

LINDA: You keep doing that, don't you? The "us vs. them" mentality. These issues aren't black and white, Mrs. Kutcher. It may reassure you to think that all the people judging you lead perfect lives in beautiful houses, but that's simply immature. All around the country, families are suffering terrible tragedies and loss. They conduct stony-faced press conferences and appeal to the public and wait. They wait and they wait and they wait. The very lucky ones get to rebuild. The lucky ones get a body. In a wood, by the train tracks, floating along a river, whatever. They share their tragedy with the public, and that is a gift. The gift of catharsis.

KAREN: I don't care about other families.

LINDA: Of course not. Five years ago there was a grieving father and an absent mother. There was the term 'suspicious circumstances' there were numbers, statistics of impossibilities. And there was a picture of an unfeeling woman being put into the back of a van.

KAREN: Stop it! Just stop it!

LINDA: You didn't say anything, you didn't try to convey this innocence you speak about now. You were cold, Karen. Unfeeling.

KAREN: *(bringing her fist down on the table)* HOW DARE YOU! You have no idea about what I've been through! To have that torn away from you! This is hell, not just another fucking scoop!

Karen is shaking. Linda notes this.

LINDA: You do get quite angry when stressed, don't you?

Karen slumps back in the chair. Silence.

LINDA: You're wrong by the way. *(beat)* I wanted this story. People get to disappear sometimes. No resolution. Or answers. It's not fair.

Linda is lost in thought for a moment.

KAREN: Please-

LINDA: -It's all right, Mrs. Kutcher. It'll be over soon.

Scene 2

Thursday afternoon. Karen is nowhere to be seen. Martha is in the kitchen, rooting through cupboards. On the kitchen counter is a large big bag, filled with bottles.

MARTHA: Come on, there's got to be something else here.

Footsteps up the stairs; the gate opens and closes, keys in the door. Karen enters.

KAREN: Martha? How did you get in here?

MARTHA: Got a master key. I thought that as we had an inhuman tenant here, we should probably check there isn't anything unsavoury knocking about.

KAREN: I don't understand.

MARTHA: Oh, no?

She slams a newspaper on the table.

MARTHA: Maybe you haven't been past a newsstand today, but I have. Or do you think I'm a (*reading from the article*) "painful reminder of how far you fell from a comfortable middle class life"?

KAREN: The article.

MARTHA: The penny drops.

KAREN: I told her the truth. Martha, you have to listen-

MARTHA: -Don't you fucking try and do that. Don't tell me what to do. You may think I'm scum, but I'm not a monster.

KAREN: That's not what happened.

MARTHA: Yeah, I read about this. How you're still harping on about winning a cot death rollover. What was it the article said? "Maintaining her delusion". You must really think I'm thick.

KAREN: Martha-

MARTHA: -Shut it! I can't believe I didn't recognise you. Thought I had an eye for the bad ones. I'll never make that mistake again.

KAREN: This is my home.

MARTHA: Your home, is it? Thought you could tuck yourself away up here? This is a community. Kids play in the corridors. Probably got the gate to trap them. Probably a sick souvenir .

KAREN: Martha, I think you should leave.

MARTHA: You *think*, do you? And what are you going to do if I refuse? Kill me? I'm not your type, love; I'm out of nappies and I can put up a fight. I'm not going to stand for everyone out there thinking the people round here are criminals who look out for each other.

KAREN: Why do you have a bag?

MARTHA: What, this?

She taps the bag.

MARTHA: Just a bit of evidence. “One man’s trash” and all that. The Daily Direct will be very interested in this. “Baby Butcher Boozer”. Nice little companion piece, I think. Oh, I’ve got some stories to tell them. Like how the government pays for a monster to get pissed and how she’s trying to fuck every man in the building.

KAREN: Martha, please!

MARTHA: Please? Is that what your little boy said? How could you? I’ve got a little girl and I could never... you’re disgusting. Just a pathetic cunt.

KAREN: *(Beginning to cry)* I didn’t-

MARTHA: Here we go. Meryl Streep, everyone! Watch her trot out the story of her sheer fucking bad luck.

Bill comes up the stairs and through the open doorway.

BILL: Karen. Everyone’s talking. About you... the paper... someone showed me. Did you?

KAREN: Bill, that’s not what happened! Everyone’s twisting the facts!

MARTHA: Here's lover boy. Hope you weren't planning on having kids, Bill!

BILL: Not now, Martha!

MARTHA: I'm going. Being in the company of scum leaves bad taste in my mouth.

She picks up the bin bag and heads for the door.

MARTHA: *(On her way out)* I don't think many people in this building will be happy sharing space with a murderer and a whore. Perhaps I'll get a petition round.

She exits.

KAREN: Bill-

BILL: What did you do, Karen?

KAREN: *(running and grabbing him)* Nothing! I didn't do anything! You have to believe me!

Silence, Bill slowly pushes Karen away.

KAREN: Bill?

BILL: Karen... Little boys, Karen.

KAREN: Bill.

BILL: Little boys. I can't believe-

KAREN: -Because it's not true! It's not true, Bill!

BILL: I need some time-

KAREN: You believe me, don't you?

Pause.

KAREN: Bill, I'm begging you!

BILL: I'm sorry, Karen.

He begins to leave.

KAREN: I CAN'T BE ALONE AGAIN!

He ignores her and exits, swinging the door closed behind him. Karen is broken.

KAREN: I won't...

Suddenly the radio switches on by itself music fades in and out between the loud static. Karen knocks it off of the table in frustration, but it continues to play. The kettle starts to boil. She wheels around, grabs it, and hurls it into the sink. Again, the noise does not stop. Outside, a dog starts barking. At the same time, a dog is barking and scratching outside her door. She wheels around again, wide-eyed with panic and terrors.

The noises repeat, getting louder and louder. Karen grabs a bottle from the counter and hurls it at the door, where it smashes.

The noises get louder, this time accompanied by a small crack; like a branch snapping off a tree. Karen turns around and around before collapsing to the ground. It is hard to tell whether she is crying or laughing. The lights are flickering, sometimes leaving Karen in darkness.

The noises grow deafeningly loud, the crack now the volume and density of a thunderclap. Just before the room is torn apart by the cacophony, the sound suddenly cuts into a dead silence. Karen looks up.

KAREN: Quiet...

The baby monitor crackles to life. A cry. Karen laughs.

Snap to black.

END OF ACT.

Act 3

Scene 1

Friday night. Dark. Dog barking in the distance. A small amount of light. The flat looks empty. A slow clunk of a key in the door. Martha enters with trepidation. As the door moves open we can see that 'BITCH' has been written on the door in spray-paint. She looks around. There is no one in sight. She moves further and further into the flat, her shoes cracking the broken glass at her feet, eventually making her way over to the kitchen cupboards to resume what she started, but not before eyeing up the radio, and putting it in her empty bin bag.

As she rifles through the cupboards once more, a figure appears in the doorway to the bedroom accompanied by the sound of dripping. Martha empties the cupboard. She is about to head for the door, but she notices the baby monitor. It crackles briefly. Martha reaches out to take it.

KAREN: No.

Karen emerges from her bedroom wearing a dressing gown. She looks haggard and disconnected, but speaks with uncharacteristic calm.

KAREN: I need that.

MARTHA: What are you doing here? Thought you'd be gone by now.

KAREN: Why are you taking my things, Martha?

MARTHA: All this is fair game. Just grabbing it before this place gets burnt down.

KAREN: I just want to live in peace.

MARTHA: Then you shouldn't have done that to your kids.

No response. Martha is beginning to feel uncomfortable.

MARTHA: Thank god for that woman from the papers, otherwise we would've never known about you.

KAREN: Right.

MARTHA: Lived here right under our noses.

KAREN: Right.

MARTHA: I mean, at first I thought she was weird. Walking around late at night, staring at the flats. Nearly called the police.

KAREN: You should have done. She's the real criminal.

MARTHA: Tell that to your boys.

KAREN: They have names.

MARTHA: I don't care. Let me through Karen. Your life is fucked up as it is without me involved

Martha moves to leave, Karen blocks the door.

KAREN: I won't let you take my things.

MARTHA: If you don't want me to take them, you'll have to stop me.

KAREN: I have every right to. You are an intruder in my home.

MARTHA: If you can't even take on a dog, how do you expect to take me on?

No response.

MARTHA: That's what I thought.

She moves towards the baby monitor.

MARTHA: I'll be taking this, then. Make me ill just thinking of you having one of these.

KAREN: Don't take that.

MARTHA: Then stop me.

KAREN: Don't take that.

MARTHA: Then come over here!

KAREN: Be quiet.

MARTHA: Stop me!

KAREN: Shut up!

MARTHA: Why?!

KAREN: You'll wake the boys!

Karen pounces on Martha, driving her back towards the front door, smacking her head against it. Karen wrestles her to the floor. Martha screams.

KAREN: Go on, Martha. Nobody is coming up. Scared of being seen near me, I suppose. Don't want to be mistaken for my friends. I guess I'm doing you a favour.

She pulls Martha up by the hair.

KAREN: No one would think we got along now.

MARTHA: You're crazy.

KAREN: You saw the woman from the paper.

MARTHA: Yes! So what? Let me go!

KAREN: What was she doing?

MARTHA: I told you!

KAREN: Tell me again.

MARTHA: She was just looking around!

KAREN: I don't believe that. You thought you could make some money from the paper. Sell my story.

MARTHA: I didn't, I swear.

Karen smacks her head against the floor.

KAREN: You're always sticking your nose in. Getting your way. Writing petitions.

MARTHA: Please let me go!

KAREN: The woman from the paper.

MARTHA: She was just walking around, ok? She had some fucking basket with her, but I didn't ask why. Said if I could give her anything she didn't pick up on I'd get money. That's everything!

KAREN: Everything?

MARTHA: Yes! Please!

KAREN: You could have left me alone, Martha.

MARTHA: I'm sorry!

KAREN: You're sorry now. You could pick on Karen Jones. She just wanted a simple, quiet life. Things are different now.

Karen lets go and stands up. Martha starts to clamber up, but Karen pushes her over.

KAREN: You only see me as the “Baby Butcher”.

MARTHA: No, that’s not true! Just let me go. I can straighten things out. Talk to people, ok?

KAREN: I want you to think about something.

MARTHA: Anything!

Karen advances on Martha

KAREN: Think about your daughter.

MARTHA: What?

KAREN: Think about how much you’d miss her if you were gone.

MARTHA: Please, Karen-

KAREN: -SHUT UP! There’s too much NOISE! Think about how much she’s going to miss you.

MARTHA: Karen-

KAREN: -You didn't want to know Karen. She made you sick.

Karen grabs Martha's hair and drags her into the bathroom, Martha screaming all the way.

KAREN: You wanted to see the Butcher.

She shuts the door. Blackout. Martha's screams fade. Silence.

Scene 2

Saturday night. Karen is busying herself around the kitchen. Something is cooking in the oven. A shape wrapped in tinfoil sits on the counter. The sound of footsteps up the stairs and banging on the door.

BILL: (Outside) Karen! Open this bloody door!

Karen looks up happily. She rushes over to the door and throws it open.

KAREN: Bill! Do come in. Care for some tea?

Bill enters.

BILL: Don't fuck about, Karen. No one's seen Martha all day. I want to know where she is.

KAREN: She came round for a chat. She decided to stay.

BILL: Karen, Tell me where Martha is.

KAREN: I think she went to the bathroom to freshen up.

Bill walks in quick long strides to the bathroom. Karen does the same to the door, promptly locking it, and heading back into the kitchen, leaving the key on the counter.

BILL: *(OS)* Jesus!

He stumbles out of the bathroom, horrified.

BILL: What have you done?

KAREN: I didn't like the way she looked at me. Or talked to me. I fixed both.

BILL: Oh my god!

KAREN: She was driving a wedge between us. Now we can enjoy each other's company. Dinner?

Bill heads to the door. Tugging on it.

BILL: Where is the key, Karen?

KAREN: Have some dinner.

BILL: Where is the key?

KAREN: After dinner.

BILL: Let me out!

KAREN: Bill. Have. Some. Dinner.

Karen looks directly at Bill. A sudden chill.

BILL: OK, Karen. But just a little bit, and then I have to go.

KAREN: It's a deal. Take a seat.

Bill moves to the sofa and sits down. Karen opens the oven and takes out an indeterminable substance in a casserole dish. She ladles large amounts into a bowl and presents it to Bill.

KAREN: Eat.

He eats. It is horrible.

KAREN: I've never cooked it before. I hope you like it.

BILL: It's... lovely.

KAREN: I'm so happy to hear it. Tea?

BILL: Uh...

Karen bustles back into the kitchen.

BILL: I really should be going soon, Karen.

KAREN: Not until after tea.

BILL: Just a sip.

KAREN: Alright then, you can take the leftovers with you. But you must promise to come back.

BILL: Sure.

KAREN: *(gesturing)* In the foil over here.

BILL: Do you want me to open it?

KAREN: I would never tell you what to do, Bill.

Bill crosses to the kitchen area, and begins unwrapping the tin foil. Karen picks up the kettle and a mug.

KAREN: I've been doing some thinking recently. What if everyone is right about me? I get confused so easily I might have muddled things up in my head. And everyone says I did it. Not one person believes me. Maybe I've been living a lie. As long as I embrace what I really am, I can be happy again. It's what Mikey and William want. They told me.

Bill has finished unwrapping his present. It's the severed head of a dog. He retches.

KAREN: I thought you'd like it. It was the only part of it I couldn't cook.

Bill looks at the oven. He retches more violently.

KAREN: Ready for your tea, Bill?

Karen slams the kettle against Bill's head, launching his body sideways. Bill begins desperately crawling backwards. Karen is walking towards him.

KAREN: The more I thought about it; the more I thought that the boys would never forgive me if I tried to replace them. And everyone thinks the worst of me for killing

kids now, imagine if I did it again? I have to take steps to fix that. So I can be the person everybody wants me to be.

Karen grabs a large knife from the counter.

KAREN: Temptation is a terrible thing, Bill.

Bill spies the key.

BILL: I've done nothing wrong.

KAREN: *(getting angry)* Whether you've actually done anything wrong is irrelevant. It's up to everyone else to decide.

BILL: We can still both get out of this.

KAREN: Why would you want to leave Bill? Don't you trust me?

BILL: You're scaring me.

KAREN: You don't know what being scared is!

Karen lunges. Bill violently shoves her to one side, grabs the key and heads for the door. The key sticks, and as he is desperately trying to pull it open, Karen slashes at

him with the knife. He dodges and moves further into the flat. Karen eyes him, knife pointed. A standoff.

BILL: Are you going to kill me, Karen?

Silence.

BILL: Is this who you are?

Silence.

BILL: Is this what you want to be?

Silence. Karen's face slowly turns from rage into despair. She bursts into tears and drops the knife to the floor. Bill hurriedly crosses past her and opens the door. He looks back at her briefly before vanishing through the gate and down the stairs, the door closing behind him. Still crying, Karen crosses to the cooker and turns on all the gas valves, closes the window and finally goes and sits on the sofa. There is a hissing. She picks up the baby monitor and looks at it with a deep affection, cradling it in her arms. She closes her eyes.

KAREN: *(fading)* Will. Mikey. Can you hear that? Nice and peaceful.

Karen becomes still. The hissing continues. The sirens are getting closer. The sun is rising.

Blackout.

Scene 3

Wednesday evening. Karen is very still. Linda peers at her.

LINDA: Just one final question Mrs. Kutcher. If your life was so hard did you not consider ending it?

KAREN: What?

LINDA: I'm just trying to understand your mind-set.

KAREN: I have thought about joining my boys. Some days it's all I can think about. There's so much noise in my head. I just want it to stop.

LINDA: Maybe you're scared of the quiet.

KAREN: I don't know.

LINDA: You hate noise, but you fear the quiet. Interesting, but you didn't answer my question.

KAREN: What would you think if I did that? That I was mad?

LINDA: It's not my place to think that. The public decides.

KAREN: Like they haven't decided already.

LINDA: You still haven't answered my question.

KAREN: There's one thing that I hold on to. The one thing that keeps me going.

LINDA: Which is?

KAREN: Hope.

LINDA: Sure.

KAREN: Hope that someone will see my true self, and not the witch from the papers.

LINDA: You still maintain that you are innocent.

KAREN: Yes.

LINDA: That your faith in people will imbue them with faith in you.

KAREN: Yes. There's nothing else to hang onto.

LINDA: Indeed.

She begins to rise.

LINDA: I think I've got everything I need.

KAREN: I wouldn't expect you to understand.

LINDA: I'm sorry?

KAREN: You have a family to go back to. People who love you.

LINDA: Not many. No husband or kids. I had a brother... Thank you for your time, Mrs. Kutcher.

KAREN: Jones. Ms. Jones.

LINDA: *(Heading to the door)* Of course. The article should appear in Thursday's edition.

KAREN: Tell them the real story.

Linda opens the door and steps through. She turns around.

LINDA: Trust me; after this, people will know who you really are.

The door swings shut. A dog is barking outside. Karen looks to the window.

Fade to black.

END.

The Duchess, the Queen, the Whore and the Housewife:

Revenge Tragedy and its place in contemporary theatre

In modern circles, the term ‘Revenge Tragedy’ is not a generic term. Specifically it is used to categorize not only the thematic evidence of a body of work, but also the time period in which it was produced (in this case, the mid-1580s to the early 1640s). By this definition, the Revenge Tragedy represents a specific phase in playwriting; one which was left behind centuries ago. However, this could be considered a simplistic approach to theatre analysis. The effect of the Revenge Tragedy boom has reverberated throughout the years and influenced multiple works. Contemporary theatre has experienced a blurring of the lines in how works are categorized. Plays with all the hallmarks of the Revenge Tragedy may now be labeled with phrases such as “vengeance thriller” or even as broad a term as “darkly comic mystery” simply because as theatre (and playwriting) progresses, the definitions are not as clear.

Throughout this essay, I shall explore the definitions and elements of the Revenge Tragedy (through academic analysis and the pieces of the time period) to see how they correlate with contemporary theatre. This should reveal that the generic qualities of the Revenge Tragedy are still engaging to both a theatre audience and the playwrights that produce this work. I will also explore how contemporary theatre writing has expanded and enhanced upon some of these elements, with focus on the use of gender roles within the genre. Through comparisons between works by writers such as Shakespeare, Kyd, Middleton, Webster, and even Euripides, to modern playwrights such as Buffini, Kane, and Ravenhill (as well as the accompanying thesis play *Butcher*), I will discover that Revenge Tragedy may not just be a group of works

from specific time periods, but a series of specific elements and ideas that remain just as hard-hitting, provocative and relevant in contemporary usage as they did in the Jacobean and Elizabethan era.

The essential elements of the traditional Revenge Tragedy pre-date the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods where they saw a wider cultural success. It is believed by some that what first started the rise of the genre was the restaging of works by Seneca the Younger. A successful playwright in the Silver Age of Latin Literature, it could be argued that Seneca built on the models from earlier works by Euripides. *Hippolytus* features characters vengeance on all sides. Athena seeks vengeance on Hippolytus for lack of vengeance, the queen Phaedra is driven into madness (which will become a popular feature of Revenge Tragedy) and seeks revenge on Hippolytus for spurning her advances, and Theseus summons the power of the Gods to exact revenge on Hippolytus. While not the format the genre is now infamous for, Euripides' popularity and the success of the play undoubtedly had an influence on the later generations. Seneca crafted a kind of tragedy that could be used both for social comment, and for visceral thrills.

The Senecan model features elements easy to spot in the renaissance era revenge tragedies. The period of disguise, madness (whether a ruse or not), and violence at a gathering, can be seen in early examples such as *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*. These templates are not rigid, but simply recur throughout revenge writing. However, their reappearance is not a mere reference, but a contemporary use of this early framework. Even as early as the Late Renaissance, these conventions and expectations were being explored and exploited. In the build-up to the final act of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, the audience are lead to believe that the protagonists Giovanni and Annabella (siblings in a romantic engagement) are to face

humiliation and murder at the birthday feast of Soranzo (the man who has hired banditti to massacre them). When the feast finally comes, Giovanni enters to reveal that he has murdered Annabella already, producing her heart on a dagger. Ford's inverting of traditional Revenge Tragedy conventions allows him to showcase 'how distorted Giovanni's thinking has become' (Clare, pg. 111, 2006).

When Sarah Kane was offered a commission to adapt a Greek or Roman classic, it appears she decided to take the traditional Senecan model and adapt it for the modern era of plays, with a loose adaptation of Seneca's *Phaedra*. *Phaedra's Love* manages to wield a power of shock that Seneca's did in ancient Greece through hard, brutal realism of the sex and violence (which Kane insisted upon). The classic Revenge Tragedy elements are in place, but put in modern realistic terms, the audience is faced not with the grandeur of the great tragedians, but with the very real emotions of rejection, rage, and wrath. Erica Bexley states that 'an audience at *Phaedra's Love* experiences acts of sex and violence in a manner analogous to Hippolytus. The facticity of these events strikes us and delays our process of interpretation' (pg. 375, 2009). This fusion of the Senecan model and the "in-ye-face" movement is testament to the power of the Revenge Tragedy in a contemporary environment.

This reinvention of tropes has continued into the 21st Century. In Moira Buffini's play *Dinner*, Paige plans a dinner party for her husband and friends, which turns out to be an elaborate plan to humiliate and abuse her guests (very much in keeping with the generic tropes), but instead of having the party be merely a location for the vengeance, it is an essential part of the protagonist's disguise. Paige's method of disguise is not a physical, but an emotional one; the grinning, pleasant hostess. In correlation, her method of punishment is not a physical decimation. She dies at the

hands of the Waiter to release her from her torture and leave the party attendees in it (in fact, the set and place dissolves into a dark, foggy wasteland in her absence). Eileen Jorge Allman comments on how the use of disguise (figurative or literal) empowers revenge protagonists:

Disguise is, of course, one of the genre's conventions, the revenger's assumption of a protective mask. It is also, however, his first step in fashioning himself as the tyrant's equal. In creating a disguise, the revenge acquires two bodies: his authored self, ephemeral and dispensable; and his authoring self, godlike in its self-creation. Disguise, he finds, allows him to fashion others as well as himself: he can set scenes, prompt action, write dialogue, and stage everything from impromptu sketches to formal masques. Most important, he can snatch control of the text from the tyrant. Like him, he is now author of his world's law and, therefore above and outside it. (Allman, pg.59, 1999)

Paige's disguise allows her to take control of her life, and decide how it ends. Karen has two disguises in *Butcher*. Like a Revenge Tragedy protagonist, she masks herself in her new identity as "Karen Jones" in an attempt to define her life her way and escape the tyrant of the persecuting society. The failure of this disguise is what begins her quest for revenge and upon her turn to madness (another Revenge Tragedy staple) she adopts a new disguise. From Karen's perspective, the disguise is to reassure guests, to be the loving wife and mother. To an audience, this ruse is clearly seen through to not only make an audience uncomfortable, but to portray the violence that will inevitably follow. Modern playwriting has adapted elements of the Senecan

model and used them to create powerful and engaging work. For example, Karen's vengeance is impotent at best, with no real target, and *Dinner* is more the final act of the model rather than the complete package, but it is these twists that assert the importance of Revenge Tragedy motifs in contemporary theatre and highlight their relevance in playwriting.

While the era of Latin Literature laid the foundations for the Revenge Tragedy model, most scholars cite Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* as 'the prototype of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy' (Kloke, pg. 8, 2007). Melanie Kloke's paper *Hamlet and the Genre of Revenge Tragedy* outlines the key roles of the 'Kydian' Formula for Revenge Tragedy. Analysis and comparison of these examples provides an important insight into how the genre has evolved and continued to be enjoyed by audiences. The protagonist, dubbed 'the Avenger', has several key qualities:

The avenger is not a bloody thirsty criminal but a very complex character, who has to deal with an unjust and difficult situation. In this situation he starts to lose the interest in his life, which results in madness and even in suicidal fantasies... Even though he has the audience's sympathy during the play, he will be condemned for his bloody murder in the end... It is typical for the avenger of the Revenge Tragedy to that he is inferior to the villain concerning political power and status... During the play the avenger usually undergoes a change of personality, which is often the shift from a silent man acting in privacy to one who puts himself in the center of the play. (Kloke, pg. 10, 2007)

This framework has been utilized not only for Revenge Tragedy protagonists, but also dramatic protagonists as a whole. It immediately creates a sense of struggle, and challenges an audience's perceptions, by either endearing the character to the audience and revealing a hidden truth, or presenting an unsympathetic figure and humanizing them. *Hamlet* is the best-known example of 'the avenger' archetype, but many protagonists, male and female, have incorporated these elements. Whilst not the titular character and pre-dating the title of Revenge Tragedy, Phaedra of *Hippolytus* is not only ensconced in a difficult situation, but also inferior to Hippolytus due to her gender, descends into madness, and places herself into the center of attention by following through with her suicidal fantasies.

For a more unconventional modern take on the genre, the nameless (and numberless, due to lack of line allocation) protagonist/s of *Pool (No Water)* by Mark Ravenhill provide an intriguing portrayal. The world of the play is not concerned with matters of state and politics (as per the grander tradition of older revenge tragedies), but instead the more contemporary cut-throat world of art, in which they are the inferior, left behind by the whirlwind success of another colleague. An accident allows the avenger/s to step into the spotlight, using their colleague's suffering as a springboard for their potential success, a fitting vengeance for an assumed slant on their talent (heavily implied as envy-induced madness). Upon the colleague's recovery, fear of their project being re-appropriated leads to the self-destructive act, as he/she/they lay waste to the art project. In the world of the play, this is certainly the cruelest act of all. *Pool (No Water)* is an examination into friendship, art, and jealousy. The centuries old format of Revenge Tragedy helps to create this important engaging character, despite that on the page the character is without form. Audience sympathy for their position as the friends left behind turns into animosity at their

violent act, regardless of the fact that no blood has been spilt. The artistic and emotional betrayal is visceral enough.

Karen from *Butcher* fulfills similar goals. Her place on the pecking order is low not only due to her withdrawal from society and her persecution, but her passiveness allows her to be bullied by the other residents of the tower block. Her suicidal fantasies come in the form of her hinted alcoholism and her lack of self-forgiveness ('To live without your children, as surely as caring for them, can be suicide in all but name.' [Kerrigan, pg. 337], 1996), which in turn creates the distant individual the audience sees in the opening of the play. In a twist on genre conventions, Karen is not the agent of her newfound attention. She despises it and it proves the final straw in her downward spiral into madness. Also, the decision to split the interview/confession scene and spread it throughout the play should hopefully create some conflict in the audience's opinion of Karen. In contrast to the typical linear progression of the genre, the regular time jump to the moment it all went wrong juxtaposed with the chance of happiness before and the barbaric acts afterwards should create uncomfortable questions about the biggest villain of the piece. This is only possible by taking the conventions of 'the Avenger' and inverting them through more contemporary ideas of playwriting and theatre craft. Moira Buffini applies a similar technique in *Dinner*, where Paige appears as the antagonist at the beginning, but the gradually leaked secrets of her backstory reveal her true identity as an emotionally abused and deeply sad woman. The constant twists ensure that Revenge Tragedy elements are just as enjoyable to a contemporary theatre audience as they were centuries ago.

Butcher also expands on and plays with the second character archetype: The Villain:

Usually a king, whose private life does not correlate with the morality of the time. He is a very active person, who always plans intrigues against the protagonist of the play... he is politically very powerful and competent, but, on the other hand, always striving for more power. In order to reach his aim, the villain proceeds in a Machiavellian and perfidious way (Kloke, pg. 11, 2007).

As touched upon earlier, Karen's main opposition throughout the piece is society itself, but this is personified through Linda and Martha. Linda is the more obvious superior as a younger but more successful figure, striving for more column inches and a wider readership. Her manipulation of Karen is Machiavellian in its deployment, and she seems to have an emotional motivation to punish her further (she loosely hints at a murdered sibling) which encourages her sense of justice. Martha, the more vocal and visceral villain, demonstrates her power from her first moments appearing in the play, where she essentially badgers Karen into letting her into the flat and subsequently blackmailing her just so she will sign a petition. While not the business of Kings and courtiers, Martha's assertive presence and desire for influence set her aside as the villain of *Butcher*. While she is not the source of the problem, she is the agent that facilitates the abuse of the avenger. As such, when Karen's grip on reality finally dissipates, Martha is the first victim. Her threats to manipulate the community against Karen are not dissimilar to Claudius' machinations against Hamlet, specifically utilizing Hamlet's murder of Polonius to turn the court's opinion against him, even persuading his mother that sending him away is the best solution. This archetype probably has the most wide-reaching influence out of any in the

Kydian Formula, and has inspired many engaging theatrical antagonists, whether directly or indirectly.

The final character archetype is harder to define as the Revenge Tragedy has adapted to the settings of contemporary theatre. The Avenger performs the vengeful actions, their backstory and situation lays the foundations, but there has to be something to give the Avenger that final piece of motivation. In Revenge Tragedy, that character is referred to, rather straightforwardly, as The Ghost:-

The ghost in the Kydian Revenge Tragedy is the medium through which the avenger is made familiar with the murder he is supposed to revenge. It symbolizes that a revenge situation is a very extreme and unusual one to be in and that revenge lies beyond human reason. The ghost is a victim as well as a representative of death, who is also the reason for more death in the action (Kloke, pg. 11, 2007).

Kyd's ghost observes the plays actions from the sidelines, but they are the specter that incites the revenge. *Hamlet* again contains the most well-known example, but the distinction of the ghost character becomes harder to define in contemporary revenge writing. The ghost ceases to be a physical presence, and more of a metaphorical representative haunting the Avenger. Buffini's avenger Paige is spurred by the ghosts of her past, the relationship she had, the life that has become joyless. She stayed with her husband Lars out of love, and that love has gone as well. The knowledge that he is planning a divorce, and the papers that sit in his office drawer is the final ghoulish item that pushes her into her final vengeance; forcing Lars to try and live without her. The avengers of *Pool (No Water)* have a crossover in character

tropes. Their villain is also their ghost, in that the idea of an artistic community and success as a collective are the thoughts that inspire them to commit sadistic acts. Karen's ghost is much more reminiscent of the Kydian Formula, albeit more hallucinatory poltergeists than traditional specters. Strange occurrences have been plaguing Karen even before the beginning of *Butcher*, and these events increase in intensity after Karen's exposure (her lowest point), leading her to break with sanity and embrace a twisted sense of empowerment. As Karen, a woman suffering from extreme survivor's guilt, imagines these unnerving moments, the Ghost's actions are far more aggressive towards the Avenger, calling out louder and louder until they are screaming to be heard. When the sound of a baby is finally heard, the audience knows that Karen is now set on a more sinister path. The ghost could be argued to be the most obscured of the Kydian archetypes, but it has not been expunged entirely, it is essential to begin the path towards the vengeful act. Once again this shows that Revenge Tragedy methodology has not been made irrelevant, but instead it has been adapted to challenge and surprise contemporary audiences.

Revenge Tragedy tropes have been used throughout the years not only to tell an extraordinary tale, but also to provide insightful comment, either on society, gender, or theatricality as a whole. Even with a simplistic and superficial analysis, it is clear that every Revenge Tragedy by its very nature is a comment on justice. Are the actions of the avenger just? What should have been in place to prevent the situation from arising? What is a person capable of when pushed to their very limits? These questions were being asked since the emergence of the genre ('In considering the horrific excesses of Senecan drama, it should be remembered that in the Renaissance Seneca was also admired for his loftiness of style, sententiousness, and moral seriousness'. [Clare, pg. 19, 2006])

The Elizabethan playwrights expanded on these ideas with wider critical content, but to avoid any ire from the aristocracy and Monarchy, they utilized a very straightforward theatrical loophole; they set their works in a different country:-

Fantasies of revenge can be safely projected on an alien political and religious culture. The Italian principalities, through popular association with crimes of blood, in their multifaceted aspects of murder, kin, passion and will, were the obvious choice of foreign location, and stories of crimes of passion, often of recent memory, were mediated through a range of sources including novella and travel writing (Clare, pg. 92, 2006).

Italy's attitude towards family honor was the perfect fodder for tragedians of the time, and allowed them to explore the erroneous decisions of families and individuals focused on stature, reputation, and general communal standing. One real life event from 1585 (the murder of the Duke of Bracciano) served as the inspiration for John Webster's *The White Devil*, but this is not just a richly retold piece of sensationalism, but rather 'a doomed pursuit of social mobility, as an ambitious middle-class family attempt to invade an artisocracy which wreaks revenge upon them for their social presumption' (Clare, pg. 96, 2006). Francisco, the Duke of Florence, hires the services of Count Ludovico to conduct his revenge, and upon completion of the play, it appears that the Duke will not face any legal justice. Meanwhile, the central female character Vittoria, is faced with a rigged trial, a fitting punishment from the aristocracy to a woman who dared to think about joining their ranks, regardless of the fact that their rank and base actions make them the lesser to Vittoria's steadfast defiance. Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* further conveys these

ideas when the recently widowed titular character is punished by her own family when she a man of a lesser station. Remarrying alone would have been enough to incur the wrath of her brothers, but this social shame provokes an intense and highly disturbing response. The Duchess' actions would most likely have been frowned upon by the Elizabethan audiences of the time but 'Webster consistently presents her as noble and courageous' (Clare, pg. 102, 2006), revealing, for the time period, an incredibly progressive idea regarding marriage for love over marriage for the benefit of the family. The Duchess' resulting torture and resilience in the face of death also assist in making her an admirable and sympathetic character, thereby associating the idea with a virtuous character, and the traditional values with the villains.

Karen's struggle in *Butcher* is dealing more openly with a modern social issue, the idea of trial by press, and the idea of "guilty until proven innocent". Karen's mindset and manner immediately suggest to the audience that she is an innocent. The revelation about her past and her re-telling/re-living of the event only furthers their sympathy. When the neighborhood discovers her past, she is immediately ousted and brutalized, leading to her unleashing mania and brutality, tragically becoming the monster the people believed her to be. Even Bill, who she was slowly entering into a romantic relationship with (representing a chance at a new start, a new life), rebuffs her upon this knowledge, albeit with some confusion and reluctance. Despite her horrifying actions towards others (and even herself) at the climax of the play, Karen remains a tragic figure, and the characters around her are the true villains. This should bring the audience to question their sense of judgment, and highlight the issues of verisimilitude in print journalism.

The very methodology of the revenge can also be utilized to highlight the societal issues, as well as form a comparison to how far gone the avenger has become.

The Senecan model favors final vengeance at banquets, feast and gatherings for this exact reason, as Seneca himself identified ‘a link between vengeance and excess. Much Revenge Tragedy is structured by a grim equivalence’ (Kerrigan, pg. 115, 1996). Titus Andronicus makes a meal of his enemies, destroying them completely as they have (through their vile act of rape) destroyed Lavinia and the inverted feast of ‘*Tis Pity She’s a Whore* was set to be a violent humiliation of incestuous love, but instead Giovanni proves the excesses of his love and his egocentric thought. For *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd focused on a method of execution that might stir up memories, regardless of the continental setting through using reference points of the period to highlight the wider issues in the play:

Though the Senecan influence has been well documented, critics have paid little attention to contemporary cultural practices such as public executions and hangings at Tyburn to explain the play’s particular fascination with the hanged man and the mutilated and dismembered corpse. No other play of the Renaissance stage dwells on the spectacle of hanging as Kyd’s does, and the Senecan influence will not in itself account for the spectacular on-stage hangings and near hanging’s in the play. (Smith, pg. 71, 1992)

This choice of execution would not only produce a shocking effect for the audience of the time, but also prove that the social issues conveyed were not exclusive to Spain, and were very much as relevant in Britain as the method used to dispatch the characters. The use of particular violence to focus on issues is still being utilized in a modern playwriting setting. In *Butcher*, the most heinous acts of violence are committed on a dog, not only to highlight Karen’s impotent rage at her life and the

people around her, but also to play on a modern audience's fears of violence directed at domestic animals. The incorporation of the dog into the Senecan feast scene should highlight the horror of the act, as well as show the effect of Karen's mistreatment. Her life as a wife and mother was warped and perverted, and has almost inevitably led her to this perversion of a domestic scene.

The very decision to produce all these works for the stage allow the audience to contemplate the issues, as 'the stage is a world which they know intimately, yet from this safe distance they can applaud or relish or deplore successive acts of villainy' (Clare, pg. 55, 2006). As is always the case in a shifting theatre landscapes, there are some exceptions to the use of meta-theatrically (*Phaedra's Love*, mentioned previously, being a particularly vibrant example), but nevertheless it is a staple employed by writers of revenge tragedies to create depth in characters and to allow the audience some rumination over the moralities on show.

One area of social comment that the Revenge Tragedy repeatedly returns to is the idea of gender politics and the role of women. Women are frequently given the role of victim, but this is not to say that the writers rendered them powerless. In fact, many female characters conducted their own plans of revenge, or fought back against the societies that would oppose them, or both. The very nature of a Revenge Tragedy means that there will be a dramatic change in power and character. For the female characters this often means a gained strength, whether utilized for good or evil. The very action of the genre won't allow the characters to remain unchanged. Ania Loomba explains the transformation:

As long as [the] ideology is not in crisis, the various contradictions imposed on women serve to destabilize the supposed fixity of patriarchal

notions. No longer reconciled within a fixed and static whole, these contradictions result in change, alienation, and finally resistance. (Loomba, pg. 43, 1989).

This resistance can be seen in works predating the Senecan model. Euripides' *Medea* undergoes terrible mistreatment at the hands of Jason, and as a result rejects the typical patriarchal view of her role and becomes as cunning as any of her male contemporaries, leading her to deplorable acts, which are still considered some of the most villainous of any tragedy protagonist. This consideration highlights a particularly interesting viewpoint in Revenge Tragedy, which John Kerrigan calls 'a heightened anxiety which attaches to female violence' (1996, pg. 315). The demonstration of power and assertiveness that is inherent in violence becomes all the more shocking when wielded by a female character, because it is a display of dominance through barbarism. Medea (a barbarian woman) does not stand idly by and let her honor and position in Greek society slowly dwindle away, but instead fights against her oppressor and dismantles her patriarchal confines through sheer force, ultimately leading her into despicable acts. The archetypes set in place by this piece of writing would inspire the creation of infinitely more female characters equipped with agency, action, and empowerment. These characters would continue to challenge societal views in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, as Janet Clare notes:

The female avenger was generally seen as an aberration, a symbol of a world turned upside down, and as such, demonized. The energies of female revenge were unnatural, depicted as more anarchic and more vociferously condemned than those of the male counterpart. (Clare, pg. 18, 2006)

Of course, not all female characters of Revenge Tragedy were as brutal, but their empowerment proved to be just as shocking. For example, in *The Duchess of Malfi* The Duchess undergoes torture for her crime of agency, but faces death steadfastly, demonstrating bravery beyond the corrupt male characters. Violetta from *The White Devil* is brought before a trial she has no hope of winning, and Webster uses the opportunity to ‘compel admiration for her defiance and self-assertion’ (Clare, 2006, pg. 97), qualities that would usually be attributed to men. One of the most striking examples of the Revenge Tragedy challenging patriarchal society is Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling*, and the characters of Beatrice-Joanna and Isabella, who are (as typical for the ideology of the time) ‘imprisoned by the institution of marriage and the authority of their patriarchal guardians’ (Malcolmson, pg.145, 1990). They plot, scheme, and manipulate to free themselves from their pre-assigned role in society, leading not only to death and despair, but also to very important questions about equality and mistreatment, as Christina Malcolmson explains:

The play ruthlessly examines hierarchical relations and exposes them as relations of power; individuals are socially superior to others not because of their higher intelligence or morality, but because of the arbitrary factors of birth and gender and because of the use of force. At important moments in this play, women are morally and intellectually superior to men, servants to masters, and the members of the middle classes to the aristocracy. The play appears to be dismantling the principle of hierarchy (Malcolmson, pg. 143-44, 1990).

The issues of gender politics continue to be a relevant issue to this day, and the extremities these characters go to in an attempt to be heard or gain respect only highlights the difference in treatment. By taking on the role of the avenger, these women empower themselves, shifting the focus on them, and shifting the audience's attention to their pain at the hands of abusive family members, spouses, and the confines that the society has placed them into.

In *Butcher*, agency is inverted. Bill, the only male character in the play, is not a man of agency. He is reactionary and relatively passive. The one key decision he makes is to hold on to the views given to him by society and condemn Karen, which in turn condemns him to his fate. Karen's accusation of murdering her children is especially important because, dating as far back as *Medea*, this is the most shocking crime that a woman can commit. The perversion of the maternal role is deeply disturbing, and a key point in signifying the level of vitriol that Karen receives. Bill rejects her based on the idea of this perversion. After her descent into madness, Karen embraces the idea of being a monster, the idea that society has been pushing on her for five years, regardless of her innocence. She judges herself the way that society has judged her, and as punishment for failing her children, she decides to attack Bill, her one remaining chance for a stable life (potentially with a new family). She was declared unfit to raise children, so she takes steps to prevent herself from having more. This not only highlights the extremities of the hate rhetoric directed at such people (even without proof), but also serves to make Karen a deeply tragic and pitiful figure. Even in her empowerment, her guilt makes her direct some of that vengeful rage at herself, the final piece of evidence revealing what the world at large has done to her. This could only be accomplished through the use of Revenge Tragedy tropes.

The extremities help reveal the smaller truths, as is the case with Beatrice-Joanna and Medea.

In short, while the term “Revenge Tragedy” has been appropriated to the Elizabethan and Jacobean, its importance has not diminished. The elements utilized in them have seen the creation of some of the most three-dimensional characters in playwriting (including Shakespeare’s most famous protagonist), as well as providing a platform to highlight social injustices. By dipping into the excess of violence and barbarism, playwrights throughout the ages have provided criticism of the class system, gender politics, theocratic debate, and the corruption of politicians. These genre elements are just as important in contemporary theatre as they were centuries ago. Chris McMahon explains the importance of maintaining use and knowledge of these elements:

Genre studies, regardless, are of enormous value when interpreting tropes. Also, we owe our understanding of the force of genre to such studies. Indeed, the most important aspect of genre studies is the way they can show us how texts are influenced not only by texts and events in the generalized economy but also, if not primarily, with respect to earlier texts in the genre (McMahon, pg. 20, 2012)

The inspiration that Revenge Tragedy has provided is invaluable and essential to the art of modern playwriting. Revenge tragedies are still regularly revived, and many works have been the focus of modern feminist criticism for years. Revenge Tragedy not only has relevance and a place in contemporary theatre, it makes up the

foundations of what is contemporary theatre, proving that while the label no longer exists, the legacy most certainly does.

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